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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S CONVERSATION WITH DOOKERAN ON CRIME,
POLITICS AND THE AMBASSADOR/GOTT RELATIONSHIP

1) (U) SUMMARY: Ambassador Austin met with opposition UNC Political Leader Winston Dookeran at a time when it looks as if the UNC's prolonged internal disarray could ultimately lead to the party's defeat at the next election. After Dookeran praised US assistance during the 1990 Jamaat coup attempt, he and the Ambassador discussed the continuing crime wave in the country and Dookeran's proposals for alleviating poverty. They also talked of the split in the UNC's leadership, Dookeran's vision of a "new politics" and his own future inside the party or as the leader of some "third force". Finally, the Ambassador refuted logically and vigorously Dookeran's perception that the Ambassador is excessively supportive of the ruling PNM government and not sufficiently open to Dookeran's own ideas for change. END SUMMARY.

2) (U) Ambassador Austin met, on March 7, with Winston Dookeran, Political Leader of the opposition United National Congress (UNC). Dookeran was forthcoming, honest and, as the Ambassador openly told him "very likeable". Dookeran was laudatory about one particular aspect of the USG/GOTT bilateral relationship. Referring to the Jamaat-al-muslimeen failed coup attempt of 1990, Dookeran lamented the fact that the assistance provided to the GOTT at that time by the FBI's hostage negotiating team has never been properly acknowledged. When the Ambassador recalled then president Arthur N.R. Robinson's order to "attack with full force", Dookeran said that the advice of on-site US intelligence officers to the GOTT not to follow the president's order was obviously wise.

THE SEEMINGLY INSOLUBLE PROBLEM OF CRIME

3) (U) Ambassador Austin and Dookeran agreed that the crime they were both familiar with in their youth could not be compared with the escalating quantity and viciousness of crime today. Dookeran concurred when the Ambassador said that the low rate of crime detection and criminal conviction in T&T tends to give individual criminals and gangs a sense of impunity and emboldens them to commit more crimes of an even more daring nature. The Ambassador asked Dookeran about his attitude toward the Keith Noel 136 Committee led by Stephen Cadiz. Dookeran said he is sympathetic to grassroots anti-crime campaigns such as that of the Noel Committee and had personally participated in the committee's "death march" of October 2005. He spoke favorably of Cadiz and his recently-announced referendum on individual rights, poverty and leadership, and said he and Cadiz speak the same language.

4) (U) Ambassador Austin and Dookeran agreed that

corruption in the publicly-funded Unemployment Relief Program and the Community Based Environmental Protections and Enhancement Program has been an important factor contributing to the crime surge. Dookeran said he has proposed market-based solutions to the problem of youth unemployment as well as other social strategies such as government purchase of insurance for the financing of tertiary education for disadvantaged youth. However, the Ambassador pointed out to Dookeran that many of his recommendations tend to be abstract and lacking in specificity, which has led him to wonder if ordinary voters can understand Dookeran's proposals.

A SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE

5) (U) Dookeran recognized the ambiguity of his position on the T&T political scene and how totally at odds his placid personality and seminar-leading style are with T&T's traditional political culture and with his own party. As he said to the Ambassador, both the ruling People's National Movement (PNM) and the UNC subscribe to a cut-throat political culture which eschews collaboration and compromise in favor of a central guiding principle-the pursuit of power. As for his role within the UNC, Dookeran told the Ambassador that he knew "from day one" that party icon Basdeo Panday never intended the concept of a split party leadership to succeed and that Panday would muddy the leadership waters by retaining for himself the role of parliamentary opposition leader. This maneuver placed Dookeran in an almost untenable position.

6) (U) Throughout the past six months, Panday has subjected Dookeran to the worst indignities and embarrassments he could muster, omitting to invite him to leadership meetings

and failing to attend Dookeran's own "unity" seminars. In the name of party unity, Panday fired UNC Senator Robin Montano, ostensibly for airing the party's dirty linen before the media, which was quickly followed by the resignations of two more Dookeran adherents, Senator Roy Augustus and Member of Parliament Gerald Yetming. Most recently, against Dookeran's advice, Panday scheduled the major UNC "unity" rally of February 19, at which Panday's supporters publicly forgave and welcomed back to the fold the controversial Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj who is widely credited with having brought about the defeat of the UNC government, at the 2002 election.

7) (U) Ever the team player and in his desire to demonstrate the real party unity he craves, Dookeran joined Panday, Maharaj and millionaire businessman and deputy Political Leader Jack Warner on the podium. Dookeran delivered his standard party-unifying, national consensus-building speech. However, he was booed by UNC party workers reportedly ferried to the rally for the purpose. Dookeran told the Ambassador that, since the rally, many UNC supporters had apologized to him for the booing. The Ambassador praised Dookeran for his courage in sticking to his principles and for delivering his message to at best a lukewarm and even partly hostile crowd.

DOOKERAN'S VISION

8) (U) Dookeran's vision is of a "new politics" comprising a three fold goal: unity within the UNC; the transformation of T&T's political culture to one of compromise and collaboration across the partisan divide in parliament; and the detribalization of the electorate away from entrenched racial identities and toward a broader national consensus based on issues. Dookeran wondered aloud how much time there is left for T&T to be set on a more permanently stable political course. He said he believes it is the current economic bubble fueled by the oil and gas boom which is keeping the lid on any potential, underlying social

instability. However, Dookeran believes that, if and when the bubble bursts, the combination of criminality, lack of confidence in the political system and an economic downturn may well generate social instability out of which will emerge what he called "despotic leadership".

9) (U) Perhaps partly out of wishful thinking, Dookeran told the Ambassador that, even in the two major parties, he senses the beginnings of a yearning for a new national identity behind which neither Afro-Trinidadians nor Indo-Trinidadians will feel threatened and second-rate. He said he believes the bulk of the UNC's rank-and-file membership is with him, while acknowledging that the party's institutions may not be. Even though Dookeran believes he has more support outside the party than within it, he feels he must operate from within his party base because otherwise he will be no more than a voice in the wilderness.

DOOKERAN'S COMPLAINT

10) (SBU) Dookeran expressed some frustration with what he perceived to be the Ambassador's reluctance to ever criticize the PNM government, and said it is his sense that the Ambassador believes that any initiative designed to change the established order will not work. The Ambassador conceded that he, like other ambassadors, tends to lean toward collaborating with the government in office rather than gratuitously confronting it. Moreover, he must avoid any appearance of involvement in T&T's partisan politics.

11) (U) COMMENT: Dookeran's claim that, outside the UNC structure, he would be nothing more than a voice in the wilderness is puzzling. Many of the budding third parties which have recently sprouted, such as the Democratic National Assembly and the Movement for National Development, are theoretically his soul mates. Many of them have sprung from a segment of the T&T middle class which reportedly occupies the unaffiliated middle ground of the electorate and might find Dookeran's calm somewhat professorial style appealing. Whether because of past disinterest in politics or because of disgust with corruption or with crime left unattended, they seem to share with him the desire to do away with the old tribalized party configuration and move toward a non-racial, national identity and issue-based consensus. On the other hand, Dookeran's reluctance to leave the UNC and attempt to lead this so called "third

force" may simply be a candid admission of his lack of political organizing skills.

12) (U) COMMENT CONTINUED: If one takes the existing racially divided electorate and party structure as a given (and there is no strong reason not to), it is difficult to see how the UNC can recover sufficiently to present a winning face to T&T's voters in time for the next election scheduled for 18 months from now at the most. This prognosis could change, if Panday were to retire or, by some unlikely conversion, hand over total leadership to Dookeran. Otherwise, any patching up of the differences between the two warring camps in the UNC would be cosmetic only and unlikely to last. The UNC's fortunes might also change, if the PNM government were to be overtaken by some massive, unforeseen public scandal. The only other alternative would involve taking the long view whereby Dookeran would leave the UNC, having done his best to cooperate with Panday and bring the party along with him, and establish the much-touted "third force" in T&T politics. However, building that "third force" sufficiently to match the strength of the PNM would take longer than 18 months, especially given Dookeran's lack of charisma and a common touch. It would leave the PNM in power at the next election, but if Dookeran were to make a credible showing at that time, he may well have a chance to assume office at the following election.
END COMMENT.